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President Makes Pitch for MX Support As Missile's Foes Gain Strength in House

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WASHINGTON—President Reagan tried to save the endangered MX missile by giving Congress a sales pitch that portrayed the weapon as both essential for arms control and vital for the U.S. military buildup.

The president appeared on television in a surprise mid-day news conference, which the White House arranged so he could urge the House to approve funds this week for production of the long-range nuclear missile. Sentiment for killing the MX has been growing steadily in the House, particularly among members disgruntled that their approval of MX funding last year didn't produce any progress in arms-reduction talks with the Soviets.

Mr. Reagan argued that the Soviets won't have any incentive to return to the arms negotiations that they left last December if the House votes to kill the MX, the centerpiece of the administration's strategic modernization program. "We must not cast doubt on U.S. and allied resolve nor reward the Soviets for their current belligerent behavior toward arms control," Mr. Reagan said.

Meanwhile, Rep. Les Aspin (D., Wis.), a supporter in the House, conceded yesterday that MX opponents have the votes to deny authorization for the 30 MX missiles recommended by the Armed Services Committee. The panel's recommendation was made in a defense-budget bill that will be debated this week. Rep. Aspin indicated that Mr. Reagan will be doing well to salvage 15 MXs in a House showdown that's likely tomorrow.

"More than 28 votes have been turned around" since a nine-vote House majority approved initial MX production last fall, he said.

Last year, Rep. Aspin rallied some liberals and moderates to support the president. He argued then that the MX was a crucial "bargaining chip" that would encourage the Soviets to negotiate a strategic arms limitation agreement. But the Soviets walked out of the arms talks to protest the deployment of new American medium-range missiles in Europe. The move undercut the argument that MX funding would bring an arms-reduction agreement.

Nevertheless, Mr. Aspin said he will try to avert an outright MX defeat in the House by proposing a compromise amendment.

His amendment would authorize production of 15 MXs, in addition to the 21 that

Congress approved last year, but it would bar actual construction of missiles until after April 1, 1985. Construction would begin only if the Soviets still hadn't returned to the bargaining table by then. This gives the Soviets an incentive to bargain, while killing the missile outright would "reward" them for staying away from arms talks, Mr. Aspin said.

President Reagan, who has asked for money to build 40 new missiles, used a similar argument to urge further missile production. Without the MX, the president said, "the incentive of the Soviets to return to the negotiating table is greatly reduced. The Soviets hope that once again our modernization efforts will be curtailed."

Mr. Reagan also asserted that, without an arms-reduction agreement, the MX is vital to match a big Soviet buildup of intercontinental nuclear missiles that has been under way since the 1970s. But the two leading MX opponents in the House, Massachusetts Rep. Nicholas Mavroules and Florida Rep. Charles Bennett, both Democrats, argued in a letter to colleagues yesterday that the MX is a "political system" of "questionable military value." They want to cut out all \$2.7 billion earmarked for MX production in the House defense bill, which covers fiscal 1985, beginning Oct. 1.

Congressional aides said House Minority Leader Robert Michel (R., Ill.) was leaning toward endorsing Rep. Aspin's compromise in hopes that the proposal would lead to production of some missiles.

The Senate hasn't yet taken up the issue of MX funding, and it is more likely to approve a large part of the 40 missiles the president has requested. Thus, the position the House takes may well have to be modified later in a conference with the Senate.

On another sensitive issue, Mr. Reagan asserted at his news conference that the U.S. didn't make any attempts to influence directly the outcome of El Salvador's recent presidential election. Mr. Reagan said the U.S. has given overt aid "to try to help democracy by strengthening those organizations within a country that lead toward democracy," such as labor unions. He added, however, "I'm here to tell you that I am assured that we have not tried to participate as a government in any way in the election of El Salvador."

Last week, The Wall Street Journal and other news organizations reported that the Central Intelligence Agency funneled about

\$2 million into El Salvador to try to help defeat far-right candidate Robert d'Aubuisson, who lost the election to Jose Napoleon Duarte, a moderate candidate. Congressional committees were briefed on the activity, sources said.